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ABSTRACT

The monograph on open education examines educational alternatives and open education at the preschool, elementary, high school, and adult levels. Implications of open education are given to include the year round school schedule, increased use of community resources, the development of a new attitude toward student evaluation stressing individual improvement, and community commitment to the provision of educational alternatives for everyone. (DB)

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EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVES

A Monograph

for the

Open Education Lesson

in the

Instructional Technology Course for Teachers

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EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVES

INTRODUCTION

Universal education has long been a goal toward which this country has directed significant effort and resources. One hundred years ago, while only 2% of our high school-age population graduated from high school, 57% of all 5-17 year olds attended school. By 1900, that figure climbed to 70% and by 1945 to 83%. Today, more than 93% of all 5-17 year olds are attending school and more than 75% graduate from high school. Based upon these figures alone, it would seem as though we are approaching the point of providing at least an elementary and secondary education for all our citizens.

These figures might be misleading. Although 93% of all those eligible are attending school, how many are being educated? To answer this question, we must examine what happens in the school. How is each child treated? Some contend that universal education will not be accomplished until <u>every</u> child is treated as an <u>individual</u> and provided with learning experiences which meet his unique learning and developmental needs. They maintain that we have provided each child with access to <u>one system</u> of instruction which may or may not meet his needs and that now, having admitted each child to school, we must provide him with a

"CONFORMIST!"

variety of learning systems and environments which together comprise of a "zero-reject" system of education.

Traditional education provides one building block for the zero-reject system. Recent trends toward "open education" provide one or more additional blocks since they represent efforts to provide alternative learning structures for some students. There is little agreement on what the term "open education" means. But most systems which are recognized as "open" share the common characteristic of providing learning options by bringing more resources into the classroom or by providing meaningful out-of-school experiences. Their programs are usually characterized by variety, fluidity and continuity.

The following sections will examine some implications of "open" education at the pre-school, elementary school, high school and adult levels.

PRE-SCHOOL OPEN EDUCATION

Nursery schools and kindergartens have traditionally been "open." They have focused on the developmental needs of the child, provided learning environments which are rich in sensory and manipulative materials and allow each child substantial leeway in directing his own learning. Consequently, pre-school instruction has been characterized by a great deal of movement within the classroom and between the classroom and the outdoors, social interaction, and individual instruction. Peer group learning also has been a prominent characteristic.

Within this system, the teacher has the role of observer and orchestrator. He observes the activities of each child, carefully noting the balance of activities which the child chooses as well as

his developmental progress and needs. When necessary, he guides the child to new resources and activities which foster the child's growth. He "orchestrates" all components of the environment so that they resonate for each child.

The entire instructional system at the pre-school level is geared toward the total development of the individual. It is dependent upon the "saturated environment" -- an environment rich with human and non-human resources.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL OPEN EDUCATION

At the elementary level, the principles of open education remain the same but a certain formality and subsequent rigidity has tended to appear as the child climbs the academic ladder. Workbooks and formal textbooks are introduced. The child is increasingly channeled into a formal curriculum.

Open education at the elementary level attempts to apply the principles which are lived at the the pre-school level. The individual child's access to and mastery of the world around him is the primary focus. Formal text-books and instructional materials are used, but within the context of the needs of each individual in the learning environment. The scheduling and presentation of the curriculum is flexible enough so as to be adapted to the needs and abilities of the students at any given time. Open education

at the elementary level is characterized by a great deal of activity in the learning environment. Typically, those activities are related to real life situations. However, since all education cannot take place in

"HAVING MUCH LUCK WITH YOUR COMPUTERIZED HOMOGENEOUS GROUPING?"

real life situations, students are often found participating in simulations and educational games. Peer-group learning continues to be an important component of the environment. And the students typically accept more responsibilities for their own learning and their behaviors than students who are not in open education programs.

The teacher's role in an open elementary program is substantially the same as his role in the pre-school program. He observes the activities of each child, carefully noting the balance of activities which the child chooses. He helps the child identify his strengths and weaknesses,

administering standardized tests where appropriate, referring for more specialized diagnoses where needed. He works with the student to plan instructional activities and programs, and with the student, reviews those programs when they have been completed. He remains the "orchestrator" of all the components of the learning environment.

HIGH SCHOOL OPEN EDUCATION

Because high schools tend to be content-oriented, it is frequently difficult to introduce or even imagine an open education program at the high school level. High school teachers are traditionally cast in the role of presenting information which the students must absorb and feed back at exam time. Subsequently, teachers at the high school level often find it difficult to think of themselves in a new role as manager of the learning process.

In many cases, where open education has been introduced at the high school level, administrators and school boards have found it difficult to cope with the resulting changes. For instance, traditional time periods have to be discarded. This results in great difficulty in keeping track of where students are at any given time, an unbearable difficulty for many administrators. Another result is that students become increasingly aware of the limitations placed on learning by confining it to a single building. Subsequently, movement in and out of school buildings on an individual basis increases. This tends to create not only administrative problems but some serious legal problems which the school board must face.

"JUST WHEN WE REACH THE OPTIMAL EDUCATIONAL CLIMATE, IT CHANGES."

Obviously, to be successful, open education cannot be introduced on a piecemeal basis. It requires the full commitment and cooperation of all persons involved in the educational process -- students, teachers, administrators, school boards, parents and community.

LIFELONG OPEN EDUCATION

Almost every community in the United States contains some resources for lifelong learning. These include the library, the historical society, continuing education programs, and parks and recreational facilities. The fact that in some communities these resources are used minimally might be reflective of the degree to which the persons in those communities are accustomed to accepting the responsibility for their own education.

"NONSENSE, YOU'RE NEVER TOO OLD TO LEARN."

It should be apparent with the continual increase of liesure time available to most Americans, and the social and technological changes which are constantly taking place, that just to survive in this society each individual needs to look on life as a lifelong learning process. Unquestionably, we must assume the responsibility for the process prior to grade 12. The question is, who is responsible for that process after grade 12. The contention is put forth that since open education programs involve the student in the decision-making process and subsequently make him at least partly responsible for his own learning, those programs better prepare him to accept responsibility for his lifelong learning. Further research is needed to document this, but it would seem to follow that students who have been responsible for their own learning through grade 12 will carry that responsibility on with them as they graduate from high school -- and will subsequently make sensible use of the community resources which are available to them.

CONCLUSIONS

Open education is not new. Its theories and practices date back centuries and have been supported by such noted educators as Froebel, Pestalozzi, Montessori, and Dewey. However, the concept is gaining increasing attention throughout the country and is being introduced, at least in some minimal way, in every part of the country.

One extension of the concept of open education is the year round school schedule. Once learning is viewed as a lifelong process with no beginning and no end other than the parameters of life itself, it stands to reason that facilities which support learning should be available at all times. Thus, schools are staying open longer hours each day and more days each year.

The flexible curricula which emanate from open education programs are leading students of all ages to use resources from throughout the community as tools for their learning. The result is that the teacher is cast in a new role. His job is to assist the student in whatever way he can -- by identifying resources, providing help in planning, being a resource, evaluating.

"I HAVE A FEELING THINGS ARE GOING TO BE DIFFERENT THIS YEAR."

Open education presents a new challenge in the area of evaluation. New methods and procedures need to be developed so that the evaluation instruments, as the instructional programs themselves, are tailored to the individual needs and objectives of each student. Expectations will shift from testing students as members of a group to testing students as individuals. Students will be competing against themselves instead of against their peers. Evaluation will become a matter of measuring individual improvement instead of being a social status symbol.

For open education to be successful, it must be perceived by the entire community as a desirable goal. The community must be committed to providing educational <u>alternatives</u> for everyone. Unless this need is perceived by the community, there will be no change. And this is

perhaps the point at which most communities find themselves today. The majority of the taxpayers, themselves products of the system, still perceive the schools as doing a good job. It is only as they come to perceive the need for alternatives for those schools that change will take place, alternatives will be provided, all students will be provided with the opportunity to pursue their educations in styles which best meet their needs.